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ABSTRACT

The paper traces the period 1945-65 when scholars of the American presidency changed their emphasis from the study of individual presidents to examination of the presidency itself and the powers it encompassed. The change was prompted by events such as World War II, development of the atomic bomb, and the Cold War. Evidence that mankind was capable of self-destruction and the threat of nuclear war led scholars to examine the powers of the presidency in shaping policy and leading the public. Contrary to traditional thinking, it was observed that the Presidential Cabinet was not a unified group. Richard Fenno ("The President's Cabinet," 1959) found that each cabinet member fends for himself with little consideration for cabinet unity. Also, cabinet members tend to develop their own lines of power which may conflict with objectives of the administration. Several studies revealed that the President does not necessarily stand at the head of his party and that his leadership is not essential to the proper functioning of the party on all levels. Rather, it appears that both parties contain wings which support either the President or the Congress. One analysis of the relationship between the President and Congress showed that Congress initiated more legislation than did the President. In terms of foreign policy, the President became a figure of international leadership following World War II. (Author/AV)

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VALUES IN HISTORY: CHANGING INTERPRETATIONS OF
THE AMERICAN PRESIDENCY FROM 1945-1965.

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VALUES IN HISTORY:
CHANGING INTERPRETATIONS OF THE AMERICAN
PRESIDENCY FROM 1945-1965

Prior to World War II it was common for scholars to deal with the role of the President and the "tools" with which he performed his job. Presidents were categorized as being one of three general types: (1) those who used the office as an instrument for the promotion of the welfare of the people; (2) those who conceived the office to be chiefly an administrative one for executing the wishes of Congress; or, (3) those who did not lead the Nation, but vetoed bad things that others initiated. The three categories were typified by Lincoln, Buchanan, and Cleveland, respectively. .

Four major events in the next twenty years (1945-65) gave new shape to the institution: (1) the Great Depression; (2) World War II; (3) the Atomic bomb; and, (4) the "Cold War." These events caused a more critical examination of the powers of the President rather than the roles played by him, as had previously been the case. American experiences in the 1930's proved that government, within certain limits, could act as a manipulator of society. The war proved that mankind was capable of self destruction and the immediate post-war period was fraught with tensions of a potential nuclear war. Moreover, it was a period when the mayors of large cities and state governors began to make economic appeals to the President rather than to the disproportionately controlled rural legislatures.

From World War II to 1965 the question was not whether the president had too much power, but whether his powers were indeed adequate to meet the challenges of the time. The trend among writers on the presidency was to focus on the institution of the presidency rather than on the man in the White House. To be sure, the president as a person never lost his appeal, for the number of biographies also increased; but, objective scholarship increasingly focused on the presidency.

The big break from the traditional approach came in 1960 when Richard Neustadt published his Power of the Presidency.¹ According to this view, one could no longer speak of weak presidents in terms of the power possessed by him on Inauguration Day. Since World War II presidents had the power, but whether they were to become a clerk or a leader depended upon their attitude toward the office. Power remained with the president only so long as he wanted it and persuaded others that leadership should come from the White House. Neustadt argued further that the presidency is for the experienced, not for amateurs such as Eisenhower. In brief, the president should minimize his risk-taking by anticipating and manipulating opposing forces before a crisis occurs. Both his actions and his inactions affect his image and determine his ability to persuade.

Herman Finer agreed with the general concepts of Neustadt, but argued further that the presidency is such an overwhelming job that he needs additional help.² James MacGregor Burns succinctly characterized

¹New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1960

²The Presidency. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1960).

the president as "a lion on a reservation." According to Burns, the president rarely, if ever, approaches the power attributed to him. The public is unaware of the many checks on the president because the news media tends to distort his powers. Burns also argued that "presidential government, far from being a threat to American democracy, has become the major single institution sustaining it--a bulwark of individual liberty, an agency of popular representation, and a magnet for political talent and leadership."³ Like Finer, Burns' major thesis was that the president needs additional power, not less power, if he is to do his job well.⁴

Grant McConnell raised the same point in his case study of the 1962 steel strike. While he left the question of power unanswered, McConnell was convinced that Kennedy lacked the power necessary to force U.S. Steel to rescind its price increase. It was the action taken by Inland Steel that ultimately brought the other companies back into line, not the power of the President.⁵

Rexford Tugwell reasoned that leadership and decision making must be centered some place and the executive branch is the proper place. He did not view the growth of presidential powers as a threat to freedom; nor did he view an increase in presidential power to mean, necessarily, that it had to be made at the expense of the other

³Presidential Government: The Crucible of Leadership. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1966), p. 346.

⁴Ibid.

⁵Steel and The Presidency, 1962. (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, Inc., 1963).

branches.⁶ In his The President and The Presidency, Louis Brownlow made the same point. The American President is first, last, and always a democratic leader, not a dictator. He has been held responsible for both domestic and foreign affairs, but, in Brownlow's opinion, he gets more help on foreign than domestic programs for "politics stops at the water's edge."⁷

In the mid-1960's a number of interesting studies centered on the role of the president as an educator. James E. Pollard's Presidents and The Press: Truman to Johnson was an insightful book on the relationship of the president and the press in terms of the educative function.⁸ Another book written on the same general theme was the Opinion Makers.⁹ The general consensus of these and other writers was that presidents had failed to educate the American public despite the vast opportunities offered by the communication's media. For a penetrating study that focused on the relationship between presidential popularity and presidential leadership, Steward Brown's work is unsurpassed.¹⁰

The historical growth of the presidency and the many facets of the office may be found in Wilfred Binkley's Man In The White House.¹¹

⁶The Enlargement of the Presidency. (New York: Doubleday and Company, Inc., 1960).

⁷Chicago: Public Administration Service, 1949.

⁸Washington: Public Affairs Press, 1965.

⁹William L. Rivers. Boston: The Beacon Press, 1965

¹⁰The American Presidency (New York: The MacMillian Co., 1966).

¹¹Baltimore: John Hopkins Press, 1959.

Corwin's work was largely traditional.¹² Clinton Rossiter, whose work on the presidency also dated back to the pre-war period, argued that the powers given to the executive branch were never fully returned when a crisis was solved.¹³ While Rossiter did not see this as being particularly dangerous, Corwin and Koenig argued otherwise. In their view, the United States had relied too long on presidential dictatorships and this was no longer safe. The only safe way, according to Corwin and Koenig, was to make the national legislature more powerful.¹⁴

A number of books were written by non-historians that gave insight into the problems of presidential power. In the main, these were written by close and intimate friends of late presidents, especially John F. Kennedy.¹⁵

The President and His Advisors

The traditional view of the President's Cabinet has been that it is heirarchical, intimate, and helpful. According to Richard Fenno,

¹²Edward S. Corwin, The President: Office and Powers (New York: New York University Press, 1948).

¹³Constitutional Dictatorship (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1948).

¹⁴Edward S. Corwin and Louis W. Keonig, The Presidency Today (New York: New York University Press, 1956).

¹⁵Pierre Salinger, With Kennedy (New York: Doubleday and Co., 1966). Theodore Sorensen, Kennedy (New York: Harper and Row, Pub., 1965). Evelyn Lincoln, My Twelve Years With J.F.K. (New York: David McKay Co., 1965).

it has been none of these.¹⁶ In his penetrating analysis of the cabinets of several presidents, he found that each member fends for himself with little consideration for cabinet unity. The survival of cabinet members does not depend on his fellow members, nor does it always depend on the president. Cabinet members tend to develop their own lines of power and these may even be in conflict with the aims and objectives of the administration.

Louis Koenig came to a similar conclusion in The Invisible Presidency.¹⁷ The Cabinet has rarely acted in unity, largely because of its departmental organization. Moreover, presidents have not been free to appoint the best men for the job because of their own and party political debts. According to Koenig, this has resulted in the widespread use of advisers that are outside of the Cabinet. To prevent the continued use of "kitchen cabinets" and outside advisers, Corwin suggested that the president should choose his advisers from among the leading members of Congress.¹⁸ Charles Hurd, a newspaper reporter, wrote an intimate account of the "inner circle" of the early New Deal which vividly describes Roosevelt's sagacity for planned dissention.¹⁹

The President as a Party Leader

It has generally been assumed that the president stands at the

¹⁶The President's Cabinet (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 1959).

¹⁷New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc., 1960.

¹⁸The President: Office and Powers, op. cit.

¹⁹When the New Deal Was Young and Gay (Englewood Cliffs: Hawthorne Books, Inc., 1965).

head of his party and that his leadership is essential to the proper functioning of the party on all levels. While this may have been somewhat true in the past, several studies contradict this generalization. Burns has determined that both parties are made up of two wings: the presidential wing and the congressional wing. Consequently, presidents have been forced to cross party lines and form coalitions.²⁰ Arthur Holcombe has described the president as a coordinator of factions, but free to stand with or above his party because of its fragmentation.²¹ The extent of party fragmentation has been examined by Carleton.²² It is his contention that the presidential election is a separate race from the congressional and that this has resulted in an Executive-Legislative stalemate.

A study by Bernard F. Donahoe has pointed up the lack of party control by Franklin D. Roosevelt. In regards to F.D.R.'s 1940 nomination, Donahoe maintains that it was the liberal-conservative split that prompted him to seek the fourth term nomination rather than the European Crisis, as has commonly been supposed.²³ Arthur S. Link's Wilson: The New Freedom also illustrates the difficulties a president encounters in maintaining party control.²⁴ While Wilson attempted

²⁰The Presidency, op. cit.

²¹"Presidential Leadership and the Party System," Yale Review, XLIII (March, 1954), 321-35.

²²William G. Carleton, "The Revolution in the Presidential Nominating Convention," Political Science Quarterly, LXXII (June, 1957), 224-40.

²³Private Plans and Public Dangers (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1966).

²⁴Princeton University Press, 1956.

to carry out the Progressive platform during his first term, he was later forced to support those who opposed him in 1912 in order to get Congressional support for his programs.

President and Congress

In 1946 Lawrence Chamberlain completed a most interesting study of ninety major laws that were enacted over the previous fifty years. On the basis of the data collected, he concluded that Congress, not the president, had been the innovator of legislation.²⁵ He found that approximately twenty percent of the laws were attributable to the president; roughly forty percent to Congress; about thirty percent jointly to the president and Congress; and slightly less than ten percent to external pressure groups.

Wilfred Binkley has done an excellent work on the relationship of the president and Congress. He traced the ebb and flow of this relationship from Washington to Kennedy.²⁶ While Binkley considered presidential-Congressional conflict to be natural, Corwin viewed it in a different light. In his opinion, the president has so monopolized the other two branches of government that conflict has now become minimal.²⁷ Alfred de Grazia agreed with Corwin on this point

²⁵The President, Congress and Legislation (New York: Columbia University Press, 1946).

²⁶President and Congress (New York: Vintage Books, 1962).

²⁷Edward S. Corwin, Total War and the Constitution (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1947).

and suggested a number of reforms that would limit presidential control of the legislature.²⁸ While Boorstein asserted that the visibility of the president places him in an advantageous position when compared to Congress; he also argued that if Congress could increase its communication with the people that this advantage could be overcome.²⁹

The revisionists, if they may be called that, have maintained that the Constitution charges the president with the responsibility of execution, but it failed to give him the necessary machinery to do the job. The president's task as Chief Administrator is therefore humanly impossible.³⁰ In Somer's view, both Congress and the courts have fragmented the powers of the executive branch and diffused its authority. Brownlow found that the Cabinet doesn't help the president, the party members in Congress fail to support him, and his party can't help him because it is more sectional than national.³¹ Neustadt has come to much the same conclusion.³² In his view, the president can shape public opinion better than he can shape a legislative program, for it has only been in critical times that the president has acted and Congress reacted.

²⁸"Toward a New Model of Congress," Congress: The First Branch of Government (Washington: The American Enterprise Institute for Public Research, 1966).

²⁹Daniel Boorstein, America and the Image of Europe (New York: Meridan Books, 1960).

³⁰Herman Miles Somers, "The President as an Administrator," The Annals, CCLXXXIII (September, 1952), 104-114.

³¹The President and the Presidency, op. cit.

³²Richard E. Neustadt, "Presidency and Legislation," The American Political Science Review (December, 1955), 980-1020.

The President and Foreign Policy

From World War II to 1965 the outstanding characteristic of American foreign policy was its bipartisanship. As Brownlow has pointed out, politics stopped at the water's edge during this period. A keen analysis of the growth of the president's control over foreign policy was made by Edgar E. Robinson in his review of the manner by which four presidents have conducted foreign affairs since World War II.³³ Hirschfield has concluded that following World War II the American president became an international leader, the leader of the Western coalition of nations.³⁴

But Hans Morgenthau has cautioned against assuming that either the president or Congress has had complete control of foreign affairs. He emphasized the role of public opinion.³⁵ Longacre concluded that the power of Congress has increased along with the power of the president.³⁶ Congress has used the concurrent resolution technique to offset the president's executive agreements as well as its control of funds to achieve its goals in foreign treaties.³⁷

³³The Powers of the President in Foreign Affairs (San Francisco: Commonwealth Club of California, 1965).

³⁴"The Power of the Contemporary Presidency," Parliamentary Affairs, XIV (Summer, 1960), 353-77.

³⁵Scientific Man Versus Power Politics (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1965).

³⁶The Presidential Office, Law and Contemporary Problems (Durham: Duke University School of Law, 1956).

³⁷D.S. Cheever and H.F. Haviland, Jr., American Foreign Policy and the Separation of Powers (Harvard University Press, 1952).